Lover's Lane Loner

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by transcryptidone

Summary

Although the FBI refuses to confirm that the brutal murder of a young, bright star was the work of the Lover's Lane Loner, sources tell me that the bloody scene couldn't be anyone else's handiwork. We hope against hope that this handiwork left fingerprints, but so far there seems to be one thing the Loner knows well: no glove, no love.

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Notes

September prompt :)

Chapter 1

The Lover's Lane Loner has struck again.

With another Alpha left dead after a night of romance gone wrong, the Lover's Lane Loner continues his deadly galivant across the country and it's the cornfields of the Midwest that's seen the latest bloodbath. Beyond the roaming of cows is a space in a field where young lovers will no longer find anything like pleasure.

That farmland has been stained with blood and I wouldn't want to taste what grows from those roots. Vegetables with blood in their veins? That's a vegetarian's nightmare.

"Tasteless."

Hannibal smirks as he reaches to turn the radio up just a little bit more -- but not loud enough to risk drowning out Will's words of protest. Will groans and gripes and complains, but he'll never turn the radio down or turn it off. They've spent many hours and many miles together, alternating between stations as the sun shifts in the sky. When they needed to put home behind them as quickly as they could, Will drove through the night blasting the best music the late 60's had to offer just to help him stay awake. As the police have trailed further and

further behind them, they've been able to slow down, stretch their legs as the mountains have flattened into open plains.

Although the FBI refuses to confirm that the brutal murder of a young, bright star was the work of the Lover's Lane Loner, sources tell me that the bloody scene couldn't be anyone else's handiwork. We hope against hope that this handiwork left fingerprints, but so far there seems to be one thing the Loner knows well: no glove, no love.

Will groans and lifts one hand from the steering wheel to rub at a growing headache. He squints against the sun until his hand pulls down the visor to give his eyes a little break in the shade. "Remind me why we bother to listen to this shit."

Hannibal shifts in his seat, his legs aching slightly and that slight ache moving upwards to collect in his lower back. "I like hearing what they have to say."

"I'm asking you *why,"* Will insists, as the open road lends him enough ease that he can look towards Hannibal for a little bit more than a few blinks.

"I like hearing them talk about you," Hannibal tells him, looking at him without blinking or risking a break the line of sight. He takes in how the sunshine turns the blues in Will's eyes greener and how lovely he looks even when he frowns, maybe especially so. It was Will's frown that Hannibal saw long before his smile. "I like being reminded of what others think of you. It reminds me what I know that they don't."

Will smiles despite himself. He tries to hide away half of it as he turns his attention back to the road, but Hannibal still sees it. Hannibal has had an eye for details his whole life and it's that eye for details that helped him to see Will when no one else could. As a witness to one of Will's bloodbaths, Hannibal knows what the others failed to see. All the others called Will young and handsome and Hannibal wouldn't disagree. But they only ever saw him with his hat pulled down low and never got a chance to glimpse all the beautiful hair hidden underneath.

He slips his fingers into the curls growing longer and longer down the nape of Will's neck. As the soft ends brush against Will's skin ever so slightly, he shivers enough to let out a shuddering sigh. "We're going to have to stop."

Hannibal hums and shifts in his seat, wishing he had the space to cross his legs -- oh well. He's never been one to give in easy to discomfort. "I'm okay for a little while longer."

"Killing," Will clarifies. "We have to stop *killing."*

Hannibal tips up his chin as he observes, "You've said that before."

"I mean it," Will insists as his hands grip against the grooves in the steering wheel.

"You meant it before, didn't you?" Hannibal remarks with the teasing raise of one brow.

"Hannibal," Will murmurs, the frustration quieting and roughing his voice. He doesn't say anything more. These moments are when Will threatens to live up to his moniker. The clench

of his jaw and grind of his teeth shows the repressed rage that could drive a man to leave blood in his wake.

Freddie Lounds and all the others gossiping on the radio and in the tabloids think that Will is entitled and bitter. Hannibal knows otherwise. He has always known, ever since he read the first headline and heard the first of the tall tales. They tried to find patterns, coming to all the wrong conclusions and realizing too late. They thought Will only killed Alphas and then he killed a Beta. They thought it was only popular kids -- which is when the word *loner* started to show up in conversation -- and then Will killed an almost forgotten burnout.

Hannibal was neither popular nor unknown. Still honing the balance of being thought of and being thought about too much. He has known for a long time that he couldn't risk being considered remarkable in a too strange sort of way. He was successful enough at school to keep in his teacher's good graces and caught the wayward eye of a boy in class who only looked at him when no one else would see. *Donnie Sutcliffe.* His family owns half the town and he expected that to impress people -- Hannibal included. That's why Hannibal chose to take him out to a lover's lane.

"We'll stop when the baby comes," Hannibal says.

"The baby should have come yesterday," Will reminds him though Hannibal never forgets. He couldn't.

They've only been counting down the days like they watch the gas meter tick towards empty. The tank can be refilled with what cash they have in their pocket -- *what cash comes from other people's pockets* -- but the process of replenishing fuel and going from full to empty seems much easier with the simple mechanics of automobiles. Although the process of a womb unladening could be fairly straight forward, even to Hannibal it might not always feel that way.

He just has to remember and remind Will: "Babies can't be rushed."

Will rolls his eyes. He hasn't forgotten that and couldn't either. As anxious as they feel to have the baby here, there's also an anxiousness about what will happen *after* the baby is here that causes a frenzied flicker in Will's eyes.

"Tell me, Will," Hannibal says, and not for the first time.

"I always thought I'd be a good dad," Will admits as he licks across a lip that's dry and tender from being worried between his teeth. "Seems stupid now. I can't be a good dad like this."

Hannibal's breath catches in his chest as Will's ends with a stifled cry, wet and choking as Will's victims have on their own blood. "I disagree."

"No kid wants a murderer for a dad," Will says, tone biting and tongue sharp as he turns his viciousness against himself.

"Pull over."

Will glances out the window just quickly, but there hasn't been a car around them in a good long while. He double-checks because of their precious cargo. Someone nearly clipped the side of their van on a sharp turn down a West Virginia backroad and that was before they knew. Will has made sure they've not had another close call since.

Will parks the car by the side of the road, open for miles with only more and more farmland, enough to seem endless. He turns the key in the ignition, quieting the radio and the roar of the engine.

"I'm sorry," Will says with a sigh as he hangs his head and curls in to knock it against the steering wheel. His voice is mumbling and muffled but Hannibal still manages to hear Will say: "I don't mean you. I mean me."

"Do you believe that I love you?" Hannibal questions as he sets his hand on Will's curled in shoulder.

Will drops some of the tension in his shoulders to lower them past his ears and show the pink of his cheeks. "Sometimes yes," he confesses. "Sometimes no."

"Should I say why?" Hannibal offers.

As Will nods, it shakes the rest of the tension in his body and lets something like resignation creep in. But Hannibal can turn resignation into acceptance.

"Every day, I have felt a stab of hunger for you," Hannibal murmurs as he turns towards Will as much as he can. He rests his hand against the heart that still thuds and pumps blood through Will's veins. "Every day, I find nourishment at the very sight of you."

"I love you so much I *ache,"* Will says, leaning nearly close enough to kiss and nearly close enough for his shaking forehead to knock against Hannibal's steadier one. "You've changed me."

Hannibal takes his lover's hand and rests it against his belly where the baby has shifted low in what little room they have left. He smiles softly at the press of Will's fingers as his curiosity grows. "You changed me."

Will's laugh has him falling forward into the kiss. Even as his lip might be tender from punishing teeth, he lets that lip get another tug between Hannibal's teeth this time, all the while keeping his own kisses soft. This is what no one could find in a tabloid. This is what only Hannibal knows of the Loner who lurks in the night. None of the connoisseurs of schadenfreude thought to think that Will might choose his victims based on *what* they do.

"Could we change enough to settle down?" Will asks as he pants to catch his breath. Their hearts pound in their rib cages so violently that they might fight to break free and live as one. "Have a family?"

"The potential for change is endless," Hannibal muses, curling his fingers around the side of Will's neck to press against a ring of scars that bisects the gland at his throat. "Even in death, there's still change."

“That’s not what I wanted to hear,” Will laments and his touch to Hannibal’s belly sweeps slowly as if lamenting. “This baby heard screams in the womb.”

“And knows nothing of it,” Hannibal assures him, smiling softly thinking of the baby in his womb and the lovely Alpha that sired them. That sire has cut down anyone who might make the world an uglier place for this baby to live in.

Will arches his neck against Hannibal’s hold and shame shows in the grimace on his lips. “They’ll know someday.”

Hannibal kisses that grimace, testing the sting of it as he might soon test the temperature of a baby’s bottle with the press of his lips. “Why should they?”

“Secrets fight to get told,” Will says as if there were flashing lights and a siren right behind their bumper.

“What makes you feel more trapped?” Hannibal asks, speaking the question that’s gone through his mind each night as he falls asleep with Will pressed to his back, his arm protecting and cradling their baby in Hannibal’s womb. “That I know your secret or that I’m carrying your baby?”

“Neither,” Will says, the surest he’s sounded since he shifted the van into park. Will kisses him in the way that forces Hannibal to *feel* as deeply and profoundly as Will does. Hannibal has never known joy the likes of what Will has force-fed him. He hasn’t felt love and adoration the likes of Will’s touch to the curve of his womb. “Trapped isn’t how I feel at all.”

Out where it all falls away, the edge of the world in the middle of the country, Hannibal feels freer than he’s ever been having caught Will in his trap. He assembled it with care and his own adoration. He took Donnie out to an off shoot of a side road while the scent of his heat filled the car’s cabin. Donnie’s nose twitched the farther he drove and Hannibal was counting on it. Donnie couldn’t resist, hardly put the car in park before he was practically throwing himself across the gear shift. As Hannibal put up a fight, he imagined his whine echoing out through the cracked window and howling through the woods. It was his mating call.

His mate answered his call as Hannibal knew he would. He blocked out the moonlight and moved in the darkness with ease. His hands were the most vicious weapons he needed and when the moonlight hit him once more, Will was painted in blood that turned black to swallow him into the shadows. His chest was heaving and his breathing was stuttering, staccato panting. Will’s nose twitched when he caught the scent of heat just as Hannibal was counting on.

Will’s blood-soaked clothes dropped to the floor of Donnie’s fancy car -- which would end up in a chop shop sold for parts -- and all thoughts of Donnie were cast off just as easily. The memory of Will’s grunts and groans, the frenzy of his thrusts, the stretch of his knot, and the spill deep inside remains potent in Hannibal’s mind to this day. It has only become more and more potent since they discovered how well Will seeded his conquest. It’s with great pride that Hannibal has carried with him proof that the *Loner* isn’t alone. Will is Hannibal’s as Hannibal is Will’s, just as it should be.

“I’m glad to be making you a dad,” Hannibal vows to his mate. “You proved yourself in the ways of old.”

Chapter 2

Rain pounds against the ceiling of the van that's broken down by the side of the road. The downpour no longer sizzles against the hood covering an overheated engine. The cool pitter-patter of raindrops has cooled the outside even if what's held within nearly threatens to fog the windows.

The wheels could be sinking into the mud and the rain welling up nearly to the floorboards, but they wouldn't know. They've accumulated blankets and pillows aplenty and even a Moses blanket to weather this storm and many others. Curled together on those blankets, with the damp nearly dried from the curl of Will's hair and the cold gone from his toes, the only care they give is to ensure that the buttercup yellow Moses blanket doesn't wash away.

They kiss and they kiss as they have since Will pulled an oil-stained hand out from between bits of an engine the way he had Donnie Sutcliffe's ribcage and declared the van just as dead as the man. He washed his hands off with a bit more rain and had them clean by the time he dragged those hands up and down Hannibal's body.

Hannibal groans as even layers of blankets and stacks of pillows can't erase the fact that their bed is only a bed in the way that a truck might have one. Thunder cracks overhead and the flash of lightning shoots in through the window as glass has shattered under a crowbar when Will wields it. There are stabbing pains tearing down Hannibal's spine and digging in deep enough to nearly seem hell bent on tearing clean through him. When he groans once more, he blurs the sound into a moan and swallows down any of the impulse to cry out.

Will doesn't know yet. Hannibal is a creature with a taste for the act of *savoring.* He savored every moment of the one and only heat they've had to share. He savored an Alpha -- his Alpha, *his* -- answering the call Hannibal has always wanted to make but feared that the echo might disappear between the trees with no one to hear it. Unburdened of that fear, his Alpha planted something so much more pleasant, something Hannibal has been happy to carry with him each and every day as they've grown. He has savored the way carrying his Alpha's baby has changed his palate.

He takes his Alpha's bottom lip between his teeth and pulls it with him when he tips his head back. He watches that lip snap back against the teeth of its owner and watches the tongue that licks across, a beautiful pink against rosy red.

Hannibal loves him.

He adores his Alpha. He'd known he would, but still found himself surprised just how true it could be. He cherishes the curl of his hair, the shape of his ears, the slope of his nose, the flutter of his eyelashes, and the pretty whites of his teeth. As Hannibal grits his own teeth ever so slightly when pain tries to yank him from the land of the beauty and the romantic and into something colder and harsher. Hannibal refuses to go anywhere before he's chosen to do so. Their baby might have gotten that from him.

But as their baby has chosen a night of punishing thunderstorms and a home that has broken down on the side of the road, Hannibal wants to savor as many flavors of this experience as he can. As soon as he tells his dearest Will that their baby is on their way, the hands that stroke and grab him will become panicked at worst and too gentle at best. With time, it's possible that Hannibal will hardly be able to bear being touched, but that's still to come. For now, he needs the reminders of his Alpha's *strength*. As pain looms and the shadow of it threatens to bring him to his knees, what his instincts need most is to know that his Alpha would truly never let anything bad happen to his mate and his brood.

Hannibal presses another moan to Will's lips and as the moan thrums, his fingers twist and yank at his mate's curls just a bit harder than he intended. Will answers the tug to his hair with hands that grab and grope harder. Even with their bodies seeming already as aligned and pressed together as they can be, Will wriggles just a bit more to twist and curve himself around the protruding shape of their baby still in Hannibal's belly -- for now. The next noise to join the clamor of rain still pounding comes with the nearly thunderous clench of his womb. A groan joins another flash of lightning and a pain that has spikes with sharp ends; and that groan comes from Will's throat and through lips that hesitate while Hannibal kisses back just as hard as he has been for quite some time.

"Hannibal," his mate sighs as his belly clenches against the clench of Hannibal's womb. He's so lovely. Will's brow furrows as he reflexively feels Hannibal's pain. It makes Hannibal tenderhearted to see his mate's tender heart exposed. Before Will, he wouldn't have thought that would be possible. Hannibal thought he would find his monster's mate; he didn't expect that Will would find humanity in him. Before Will, he wasn't always sure it existed to be found.

Hannibal has been fractured since his family was torn apart. The pieces were sharp and no matter how well he rearranged them back together, they always drew blood. Rubbing shoulders with his peers couldn't be done. No hugging hello or goodbye. A handshake could be a calculated risk but that didn't happen often. Donnie's grabby hands got himself torn apart and the one that did the tearing touches Hannibal with care.

"What are we going to do?" Will questions, barely louder than a whisper, barely louder than the thunder, but Hannibal hears him loud and clear.

"We're having a baby, of course," Hannibal replies as his lips turn towards a smile in the way that never quite seems to be held within his control. Only with Will has Hannibal ever discovered himself smiling. He's smiled before on purpose or in an expected sort of way. But Will seeded a baby in Hannibal's belly and burrowed a soft spot into Hannibal's stone-cold heart.

"I'm not a doctor," Will says although it's entirely unnecessary. Hannibal never believed him to be a doctor and still has been reminded many times more as they discussed what would happen when their young encounters the world for the very first time. He has been reminded each time he expressed his preference for their birthing nest to be presided over only by those involved with the act of creation itself.

"Neither am I," Hannibal agrees and he has no animosity towards doctors or hospitals as concepts or institutions. Should they become necessary, he would concede and do so with no

regrets. Nevertheless, he's not disappointed that they're not options Will can try to argue for with much success in this moment.

"Be serious," Will says, taking displeasure in the thought he intuits that Hannibal is thinking.

"I am," Hannibal counters and the baby seems to already be favoring Will because Hannibal is punished for his backtalk with a spine-crushing, body-humbling squeeze of his womb and the roll of nausea at the back of his throat at the pain of his young pushing lower. He grits his teeth and hisses quietly enough to be nearly swallowed whole by the plush of one in many pillows. He keeps his breath steady at the tail-end and remarks, "I have to be."

"I know," Will murmurs as he pets his hand along Hannibal's back and feels the tension in the muscles that quiver and quake under his fingers. "I'm nervous."

"I know," Hannibal assures him, pushing his belly further against his Alpha's body and the safety and comfort to be found there. He presses punishing muscles against the relative softness of Will's middle and hopes Will can feel his strength too.

Will nods and kisses the furrow that has started to form between Hannibal's brows. Hannibal, with all his awareness and attunement, hadn't noticed until Will took the initiative to ease it away. Will knows pain. That's something fundamental to his being -- to the who's and how's and why's. He knows pain, loves it, and hates it. Will feels the clench of the womb he seeded and still insists on offering, "I could give fixing the engine another shot."

"You'll drown before you make a dent," Hannibal says as he lets whatever tension can leave his body go, his head lolling to the side and his bangs flipping up and away in a way that Hannibal can help but feel reflects the oncoming plow of pain like a freight train. His eyes close as he pulls a breath in through his nose and holds it just to remind himself where the control remains. "There's no rush in doing anything. Maybe we'll have a baby by the time the clouds have cleared and the sun has risen, but we can only wait and see."

"You're right," Will concedes with a sigh, rolling to his back as another clash of thunder surrounds them and another round of pain rolls through Hannibal. He places his hand flat against his sternum; if his heart isn't already thrumming against his palm, it will be very soon. "I don't like it."

Hannibal huffs a laugh with a bit more merriment that he manages to find amongst the anticipation, uncertainty, and worry. "It pains you to concede my victory."

Will turns his head and the way his hair falls across his forehead might feel like deja vu. "When it comes to you and me, there can be no decisive victory."

Hannibal hums and replies, "I think you'll be changing your tune soon enough."

The clash of thunder and strike of lightning at once might manage to surprise him. His spine jolts and his back does its darndest to arch. He's soaked and damp; it could be rain but isn't. Without the cushion of the fluids their baby had been floating and growing within, the pain becomes a grind. Hannibal has felt the head low for a little while now and the feet have been intruding on his breathing for some time. But the head feels huge, heavy, and drifting towards

horrible if not for the way he knows it is worth it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Even if the pain were only meant to punish him, pain inflicted based on the will of his Alpha can only be a beautiful thing to his eyes.

When Will helps him sit up, it's both welcome and terrible. Hannibal lies back to lean against his elbows in no time. Will does the honor of peeling away any soaked fabric that clings to Hannibal's skin. It's such a relief that Hannibal sighs in pleasure and blushes. There are some who would find it undignified to spread one's legs for a lover and do so not for sex but the product of it. He may be soaked and slick and Will's fingers may push in and feel for what he seeks, but the pleasure is a byproduct, the sideshow to the main event.

"I think you should wait," Will says when his inspection has turned up its results. Just as he reached into an engine and felt for the source of the breakdown, he has reached into Hannibal and found that there is nothing yet to do but make the best of it.

"Will," Hannibal calls out, another whine choking the back of his throat and making its way through him as his mate's child does the same.

"Have you become impatient?" Will questions. His clean fingers touch the edge of a scar from a bite on Hannibal's throat, touch just as gentle as the soft sound of his voice. There's a taunt to his teasing as well as affection. His thumb brushes against the flutter of Hannibal's cheek as his breaths turn stilted with the pain inflicted on him by his own body. The curl of his lips is soft and sweet as he muses, "I see your veneer slipping."

"Alpha," Hannibal says with a whine. Alpha, *his* Alpha, the lightning strikes and flashes against the lovely curl of his hair and the sharpness of his teeth. This Alpha brings it out of him. He presented himself in heat in more ways than one, calling out to his mate and arching his back to bare his slick hole. He had been on his knees for no one else before and the bones of them knock together now as his legs tremble with the way pain can still manage to bring him to his knees. No one but his mate could do this to him. He wouldn't allow it.

"You're a funny thing, aren't you?" Will carries on musing. When he curls over to gather a tear against his lips with a kiss, Hannibal cries just a bit more to give him more to taste. Will hums as if he can taste anything beyond salt and it sounds like praise when he whispers, "My mate."

When Hannibal's knees fall open again as the crashing of thunder echoes the unforgiving nature of labor, Will places his hand to cover his hole. It might almost be demure or with some thought given to the last remaining shred of Hannibal's modesty, but there's nothing demure about the slide of Will's fingers or the way they act as a stopper.

"I told you," Will reminds him though Hannibal could easily believe that Will's fingertips could touch their child's head. "You should wait."

"How long?" Hannibal asks, the baby feels so low, the movement so insistent and so unbearably *slow.* He wants to help their little one along, to help the babe on their way instead of enduring the slow drag that might seem to tear straight through him. But if he knows just how long he must wait, he can convince himself that this is the amount of time he can endure

-- plus a little bit more. He can think of an imaginary ticking clock and each second ticks over until there will be relief.

“Maybe we’ll have a baby by the time the clouds have cleared and the sun has risen,” Will recalls as he flexes his fingers *almost* absent-mindedly. “Maybe not.”

An Alpha like this deserves a certain kind of Omega; Hannibal knows this to be true. To an Omega like Hannibal, this Alpha is perfection: protection, love, and ferociousness all in one. He necessitates an Omega of the same kind. Hannibal has been overjoyed to protect their little one within his womb and grow his love of that child and his mate all the while bearing witness and taking part in the violence.

“I can do it,” Hannibal rasps even as every twinge makes him flinch. Any sign that the next contraction is upon him makes his heart pound and clench in his chest. There is dread, but there is more determination.

“You’ll have to,” Will says plainly as the hand not stoppering Hannibal’s hole grabs and gropes at Hannibal’s clenching womb.

Hannibal keens for his Alpha and places his hand over Will’s to feel his mate feel their child. His hole clenches around Will’s fingers and his hips shift with pain and the want for a bit of pleasure to take the edge off. He feels the weight of his womb, the pain of its squeezes, and the clench of a hole that will be stretched farther than ever before and he calls out with a moan, “You did this to me.”

This wouldn’t be the first time Hannibal has found pleasure at the thought of what Will has forced his Omega’s body to do. Will took Hannibal across the center console in Donnie Sutcliffe’s car by a curl in a backroad. From then forward, Hannibal’s body would never be the same -- and not just because of the bite at the nape of his neck. Hannibal has been taken. His body, made fit by Hannibal’s diligence, has been encumbered by his mate’s will and whims. It’s an ecstasy better than any other Hannibal has ever known. Will punished those who abused the idea of being forced -- brutes who didn’t understand how to uplift their aspirations.

“I think I feel the baby’s head.”

The way those words strike Hannibal’s consciousness has the air of something *surreal.* Emotion bursts through the cracks as he tears himself open. His body screams back at him as he gives in to his desperation to push. He pushes without thought, only instinct. He pushes until he can’t anymore and then when his eyes blink open, he might be more wide-eyed and panicked than ever before. The pain in his body is a brutal one, to be sure, but there are emotions taking over him that have been buried so long that Hannibal didn’t realize they were still there at all. Splashes of blood cross his mind’s eye but without any of the beauty. The crying that echoes in his ears is years old, the whimpering and crying of someone he so dearly wanted to protect.

It is as though the world has fallen out underneath him.

He has gone back somewhere he swore never to go -- didn't think he could. The floor of the van might disappear, his back might scrape against rocks and dampen with rain that stings. He wouldn't know. All he knows is pain, deep and in his core. His body follows instinct as his mind is sent reeling.

Will catches him on his hook and brings him back from the depths, murmuring to him as he might a startled animal, "Hannibal, feel."

Hannibal's eyes blink and he sees his turmoil reflected in Will's eyes as a mirror would, acknowledged. It doesn't get better, it doesn't get worse. It's just seen as it never has been before. He lets Will take his hand and guide it with more simple wonder than Hannibal has had before, maybe ever. He follows Will's lead and feels the creation he and his mate made together leaving the confines of his being. There's the mess of hair under the pads of his fingers that isn't his own and he feels another stuttering of his breath at the thought that he might soon give Will a child with his lovely hair.

"You can do it," Will encourages, pulling back on his fingers to let any impediment fall away. His fingers drag along the insides of Hannibal's thighs light enough to give him shivers. He shivers and pushes and *burns*, stretching wide around a child that took their sweet time gracing their parents with their presence.

Hannibal doesn't let himself entertain the thought of giving up or lacking the strength. He only knows the certainty and the instinct that tells him when to push and when to breathe. When the head is born, the relief is euphoric. When the shoulders slip out of him and the rest of the baby with him, the relief he feels is bone deep. When the baby cries, tears drip down Hannibal's cheek. Though he remains tethered to his child, he is desperate to have the little one as close as possible. The shift from holding them completely within and simply holding the babe in his arms seems a stark one.

"Beautiful," Will says, voice thick as he presses a kiss to Hannibal's sweat-damp hair. He smothers a cough in Hannibal's hair as emotion forces its way up and through his tears. "So beautiful."

"Because they come from you," Hannibal says, eyes pouring over every detail that he might ascribe to his mate, brushing just the tip of his finger against the little one's little ear.

The mouth that wails and cries and the eyes that squint closed are too busy expressing their protest to tell who they might resemble. But when Hannibal looks at Will, he sees in his mate's eyes that he might truly believe in his beauty for the first time. There's blood and gunk, mess and fluids, covering Will's hands as blood has done before, but the meaning is made anew. This new person might almost seem to have come into the world and transformed their parents into new people too.

"Victoria," Hannibal decides as he brushes his finger against the babe's soft, sweet cheek. "Is *ours."*

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